

Education for a New Society

685

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It is presumably comparatively simple to overthrow a régime and start a new one if you have sufficient resources, either of good-will, of money or of arms, or a judicious mixture of the three. Whether this is likely to be a practical method of ushering in the millennium, as opposed to more limited goals like making things a bit better for some people, is a debatable problem. The evidence is not coercive, and in any case I have no intention of debating it. My point, to put it crudely, is that in England and America, at least, this method of changing society doesn't seem likely to be possible for some time to come, and that to assume it is the only way must lead either to the abandonment of effort, or the watering down of aims, or to a lot of self-delusion about what the possibilities actually are. This last is quite prevalent, because if you deeply believe that drastic change is essential, and that life is scarcely bearable except in the hope that it will come, there is a strong motive for persuading oneself that it will come soon. This is bolstered up by much discussion among groups of like-minded people, especially young ones.

The trouble about this is that when someone with this kind of belief moves out of the inner circle of the faithful, and comes up against the ignorance, indifference or sheer perverseness of other people, he is appalled and disgusted, and often very much surprised. This is especially likely when the people concerned are very young. They suffer the same kind of baffled revulsion as some Catholics used to feel when, emerging from their own circle, they came up against the 'invincible ignorance' of Protestants, and were much inclined to feel that such deafness to truth *must* be culpable.

The reaction to such an experience is often to drive them back into the protective circle of the believers, there to build up a mental picture of 'the rest' which shows them to be hardened, cynical, sunk in selfishness and apathy. This absolves one from any effort to communicate with them or understand their attitude and leaves one free to concentrate on dreams of overthrowing them, sometime. Another reaction is a sort of fatalism, which also accepts the unconvertible, impenetrable stupidity and perversity of most of society, and resigns itself to going on being right, for an indefinite period, in a world irredeemably wrong.

Both of these are a waste of spiritual energy and a sin against hope, and a thoroughly unchristian approach to a very real problem.

For people are not unconvertible, nor are they to be given up as useless or expendable because they can't cope with the ideals and ideas that seem so obviously right once you recognize them. The failure to respond may be inculpable, due to failure in education or emotional adjustment, or it may be culpable in many degrees, from a suspicion of change which might upset one's ideas to a ruthless contempt for anything that interferes with the right to exploit other people to the limit. But whether it is culpable or not, their rejection of the hope of many Christians for social revolution does not warrant writing them off as people. They may write themselves off, but until they do so the Christian has no right to reject them, though he must often oppose them.

This has important practical consequences for Christians with strong social consciences, and especially for those concerned with education in any way. For if the situation is understood as one in which the only possible course is to put up with the existing mess, and make a living out of it, while talking about ultimate violent change, then education even of convinced radicals will be geared, as it is now, primarily to personal achievement on the practical level, with the addition of an ideological formation which is necessarily quite divorced from any actually experienced situations. When the ideological conviction builds up sufficient emotional power, it spills over into action of some kind, which may or may not achieve the limited aims it actually proposes, but has little effect on the real source of evil in our society. I am not arguing that outbreaks of open protest are necessarily useless, but it does seem clear that they can, *in themselves*, achieve little, and often produce a reaction which does considerable harm. They are seldom effective in bringing about real change, though they may extort concessions. But in the few small-scale cases in which they have been effective this has been because there were enough people in the context in which the protest occurred who understood what was going on to some extent, and sympathized with what it stood for even if they did not agree or feel a need for immediate action.

This kind of positive reaction, where it occurs, is the result of education in the broad as well as the narrow sense: there has been a gradual though sometimes quite rapid absorption of new ideas, but also a re-direction of feelings and attitudes which goes with it. Open, organized protest, therefore, is not really enough though it may help. (In some circumstances even a protest known to be useless may be necessary for conscience' sake.) But even when it is right it is, in practice, often so badly founded, philosophically, and so ill-understood and vaguely directed that success is unlikely. To assume that violent or at least open protest, whether planned or spontaneous, and little revolutionary groups busily spreading their doctrine, are the only ways to work for change is not only unrealistic, it actually helps to perpetuate the system it attacks. It does this

because nearly all such activity is a spare-time hobby. Apart from the few who are seriously disengaging themselves from the whole educational system, come what may, even the radically minded students are only pursuing revolution as a side-line. And older people join societies and groups, attend meetings, read, write and argue—but all this does not affect their working life. In some cases, people like preachers and university lecturers and some writers are able actually to make a career out of skilful development of their political and social doctrines. But this is very much an individual thing; it is useful, but as a valid moral escape-route from an uncomfortable dilemma it is available to only a small minority.

But with these ink-revolutionaries, as well as with the more numerous 'night-school' type, the real trouble is that none of the ideas can be tested. There are assertions and counter-assertions, and declarations of faith. But nobody can point to a normal social group of a size to be practically relevant and say, 'Look, it works'. Nobody knows what it would be like actually to work at the process of changing a society like ours. We have to depend on examples like the Cuban experiment which, whatever its merits, began in a way which is *not* feasible here. So we are back to square one, waiting for the millenium and meanwhile living comfortably in Babylon, making a nice profit and looking down on the inhabitants.

There are a number of Christians who realize the hypocrisy involved in such a situation, and deplore it, and feel personally humiliated and wretched because of the position they find themselves in, of working for and therefore actually keeping going a system they know to be corrupt. For the adult the possible ways out are to find a 'neutral' job like farming, or to try to subvert the set-up in which one works (which means not only the risk of losing one's job but deceiving and injuring good and trusting people), or emigration to some place where the issues are different, if not easier. None of these is available to the majority.

The young are in an easier position, because as long as they are unmarried they can sometimes afford to strike heroic political postures without much risk, even to themselves. And while they are students the problem does not really hit them as a personal one. This is partly because they are too inexperienced to realize the daunting complexity and cohesion of the forces of evil in the total political situation, and partly because of the limitless capacity of the young for persuading themselves that what they feel is right is possible, if only one asks for it loud enough. These two facts let them off the hook for a while, but they prevent them from tackling the real jobs. For it is among these young that the best hope lies of actually getting something done, but only if they are given the means to overcome early the two related handicaps just mentioned.

There exists a real possibility of creating the opportunity for the young to acquire political realism, and experience of actually

working to bring about social change. This can be done on a scale they can cope with, so that when they get to university or work they actually know a bit about what is involved. There is a possibility of raising a generation of young men and women who, when they move out into the adult world and are faced with the need for radical social change at the national and international level, will not only have a language in which to understand and plan what is needed, but will actually know what it is talking about. They would also have something of the solidity and patience, as well as enthusiasm, which comes from really doing the job and not just telling people what ought to be done.

Those much-abused institutions, the Catholic schools, take on a new significance from this point of view. They vary from the very bad to the very good, at the moment, and although there are arguments for not having them at all, there they are—not indestructible, but likely to last some time. Given that they are there, the large Catholic secondary schools do provide an unrepeatable bargain offer as a breeding ground for Christians who may be not only socially concerned but politically capable.

At the moment the social conscience of many Catholic educationists leads them to encourage the growth of a sense of social responsibility by giving information about the 'third world', about race problems, housing and so on, by encouraging school-children to undertake voluntary work, to join organizations like Shelter, to organize projects for fund-raising, to give personal help by visiting handicapped people, and so on. Schools invite handicapped children, or borstal trainees, for holidays, or encourage the more fortunate to know about, care about, and actually help, those who suffer.

All this is excellent, if only because it makes people aware of the size and acuteness of some of the problems. But it scarcely needs to be said that although it is always worthwhile to do even a tiny service that makes someone's life that much happier, this kind of work does not alter in any way the state of affairs that causes the suffering. It can even lead the young to suppose that well-organized practical relief of suffering is all that a Christian is called on to undertake in the service of his brethren. It also leads to a vague feeling that when one gets a job and marries, that's that; one has done one's share of serving the unfortunate and can now attend to personal affairs with a clear conscience.

A large school has the chance to do much more than this. It is a real community of a normal, though special, kind. It includes adults as well as children, in many levels of ability. People come from many types of home, with varying outlooks, incomes, professions and trades. The spectrum of opinion in a normal school will be very wide indeed, and the main divide will by no means always be between adults and children.

It is because of the very normal mixtures of human beings—clever

and stupid, kind or vengeful, bold or timid, idealistic or cynical, generous or selfish—that a school can be the place for discovering and testing real political principles. It is not a question of reducing principles to pragmatism, but of discovering just how valid the principles are, and how to make them real.

This could be done simply by making the children take part in the running and decision-making of the school right from the beginning, as a normal part of education, in time specifically set aside for this in the time-table. The usual argument against this is that children are simply not capable of the degree of understanding, good sense, and responsibility required. Certainly the measure of understanding, and ability to take responsibility, of even a twelve-year-old is not great, but it is very much greater than is usually assumed. It is, after all, not so uncommon for a child of about twelve to manage a family of young children when the mother is ill or feckless. A burden like this is not healthy, but it does show the degree of organizing ability, foresight, and psychological skill of which children are capable when it is demanded of them. But usually they are assumed to be incapable of anything but obedience, and not much of that except under threat of serious sanctions. No wonder that, in most schools, by the time they reach the age at which they are expected to assume authority their notion of it consists of the power to order other people about—this being their own sole experience of what authority does. Children denied any responsibility for the management of their own lives are extremely undisciplined, silly, often destructive and malicious. Their fantasies are concerned with revenge, or with licence to do all the things they think adults do—smoke, drink, smash things up, avoid work as far as possible. This is the state of mind in children which is used to support arguments against giving them responsibility: seeing this is what they are like, they will abuse it. Seeing what most adult politicians do with *their* responsibility the argument does acquire some force, but then the trouble with adults, and with many older teenagers who are given power, is precisely that they have never learned what to do with it when young, but were left to accumulate a deep fund of resentment, envy, and longing for power.

What is required is a framework within the school which assumes that what concerns the school concerns all those in it, in some degree. The narrowly scholastic aims are important and everyone has an interest in seeing that a good academic standard is reached. But this particular aim neither excludes nor is excluded by the serious pursuit of more fundamental human aims such as making possible the development of varied and creative groups and individual relationships, any more than the fact that a country's economy depends on (say) the export of good quality machinery rules out a concern for the conditions in which people live. On the contrary, children, like grown-ups, tackle a difficult, demanding task better, and achieve

more in less time, if they are also discovering an ability to live, and develop relationships, and pursue other interests and especially if they feel that the community is something that is theirs, because they are making it.

Exactly how the members of a school community could be responsible for running it is something that would have to be worked out in each case. This problem, itself, is one that older children are able to consider and solve. Contrary to expectation, their immediate reaction is not to grab the maximum licence, propose dispensing with rules, and claiming the final say in all questions. When they are consulted in good faith, with seriousness, their proposals tend to be modest, realistic and thoughtful. They often err on the side of puritanism in the demands they make of themselves, and have to be discouraged from setting a standard which could not be kept up for long. Those who do react to requests for cooperation by silly demands usually get sat on rather firmly by more far-sighted types.

The mere suggestion that children could run their own lives fills some people with such panic that they react by actually inventing and spreading accounts of outrageous behaviour, to justify their own fears. (An excellent account of this kind of reaction is given in Leila Berg's book, *Risinghill, Death of a Comprehensive School*, but it is common in any case.) This effect of efforts to give responsibility to the young is almost certain to arise, both in the school and in the neighbourhood, among parents, etc. *This is excellent*, because it gives the children first-hand experience of what any attempts at serious community-making are up against. It is terribly discouraging, but at this age they can be helped by their elders to expect it, to understand it, to keep a sense of proportion, and to handle it. They will even learn that violent opponents *can* be converted, by quiet conviction, by the fact that the thing works and that horrible prophecies are not verified. Not all opposition is amenable to sweet reason, but some is. They will learn, for instance, that resignations, outraged protests, counter-denunciations and other emotionally satisfactory outlets are a form of indiscipline which harm the work in hand. Confidence in the value of the work, patience, hope, and an intelligent sensitiveness to people of different types, are required to keep on building in the face of this panicky opposition. But these are the qualities needed by anyone seriously engaged in trying to serve Christ's Kingdom. This early encounter with the powers of darkness is invaluable.

Possibly even more valuable is the growing skill in working out plans and reaching decisions *with a lot of other people of varying views*. Children working together with adults, on such a problem as the best way to ensure the necessary concentration of highly qualified teachers for those aiming for scholarships, without neglecting the equally great needs of backward children, or down-grading non-exam-oriented activities like drama, are being stretched in all kinds of ways. They are obliged to sort out their priorities and decide what

really matters most. To do this they have to work out standards of judgment for their priorities. These will be challenged and need to be defended. When priorities are established there are still the other elements to be considered. There are practical problems of space, staffing, and time-table to be reconciled with the principles, and these again may raise all sorts of side-issues with strong emotional overtones. The children learn that no problems are simple, that no problems are purely practical, and that even the most practical problems involve a moral stance of some kind.

They make mistakes. They work out a solution, and it *doesn't* work, and all has to be done again. There are too many grown-ups around who give up at this point and take refuge in abusing their opponents, the government, or God. Children encountering such dispiriting experiences can be helped through by the support of the adults who have been there before. And this is the really vitally important thing about using the school years for education in political responsibility. For during this time it is possible to encounter the difficulties, the set-backs, one's own mistakes, and be helped over them by the adults. It is possible to learn to accept limitations without relapsing into cynicism, if there is someone there whose age gives him a longer view. It is possible to work steadily and achieve lasting results, in ways which young people alone cannot do because they are changing so fast, and lack real assurance. Given adult support and tactful advice, given adults prepared to allow an experiment to go on, and stand by to pick up the pieces if it fails, given the sense of self-respect which this attitude in adults fosters, the young members of a community can really grow in knowledge and charity and a practical idealism, based on principles tested and found to work.

Exactly where the adult veto has to come in, or if it does, is a question often raised. But it is not really such a big question after all, because if children are trusted, and *know* they are trusted, they will take a lot on trust. They will recognize that the adult in a position of responsibility may have to consider factors that mean little to themselves, and they will accept with a good grace decisions they dislike. But this only happens where trust has been built up, and here again there is a two-way educational process: the adults learn to respect the children, and free them to make their discoveries in a supporting framework. The children learn to understand the adult's task, and its difficulties, and to make allowances for stresses from which they themselves do not suffer. Both 'sides' learn to give and take, to compromise without abandoning principles, to deal with real people, not clumps labelled 'reactionary' or 'trouble-maker' or 'authoritarian' or 'progressive'.

This day-to-day, absolutely routine involvement in the running of the community, in open meetings, class meetings, meetings of elected representatives, of officers, of staff in any proportion or capacity, is the basis of education for a new society. Even by them-

selves such experiences could do a lot. But do to the job properly they should work side by side with smaller, theoretical discussions, profitably within the framework of what used to be called 'R.I.'. In this context older children can learn to thrash out just what is being aimed at and achieved (or not) by their own local community and by the wider society. They can learn to relate what they are experiencing in community responsibility to their faith and man's future. They can analyse and criticize on a wide and more general scale.

At the moment we spill out of our Catholic schools a collection of fairly well-informed individuals, some pious, some not, some idealistic, some angry and dispirited. Some of them go on to try to put their Christian principles into practice as well as they can, by the light of their own conscience and chance contacts. Others throw themselves into the student scene in either its good, its silly, or its messy incoherent aspects, with indiscriminating enthusiasm. (You can't discriminate if you have no real personal standards.)

We *could*, soon, be turning out young adults who are mixed and wayward and still not fully assured, often arrogant, fearful and selfish, but people who also know what life is about, what society is about, because they have been working at it, not just watching it curiously from behind their text-books. There will be many discoveries to make, pleasant and unpleasant, mistakes to overcome, and prejudices to grow out of. But they will have learned that they *can* discover, recover, and grow, and that the job of making the world is one that they can tackle, because they have been at it a while already. They will have had a chance to hammer out a language of Christian community that really speaks because it is talking about real things.

And when these people move into jobs and into marriage, become householders and family men and women, citizens of their neighbourhood, parish, country, they will have a new set of values arising from the habit of rational, shared responsibility. As Christians with the task of helping to bring in the Kingdom, whatever their degree of understanding and enthusiasm, they will have both language and experience that will enable them to set about their particular corner of the vineyard without unnecessary fumbling or unnecessary heroics.

All this does not add up to sanctity or prophecy, or a recipe for Utopia, or anything but an everyday human skill and knowledge. But it does at least liberate some of the human potentialities that can, under the breath of God, catch fire. It is a chance, a real, practical, Christian possibility that is already being realized in some places but needs a strong, convinced push to get it properly started. It would be a really superb irony if the Catholic schools, those Aunt Sallies of all radicals (not without reason, goodness knows), should in the end provide the one really powerful instrument for creating the new society. The snag is, it doesn't involve killing anybody or abusing anybody or being superior to anybody, and therefore may have little appeal.